

Supporting cast sends Cougars past Lions

Written by Tom Fruehling

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It's no secret who has been carrying the Kennedy girls all season.

The key to their 63-50 regional basketball quarterfinal win over Linn-Mar at home Wednesday night was having others take some of the load off senior star Courtney Strait.

"We had some girls really step it up tonight, particularly in the third and fourth quarters," said Cougars Coach Dennis Roloff, whose team will try to avenge an early-season overtime loss to Xavier on Saturday night in the Saints' gym in the Class 4A regional semifinals. "Jordan Holmes and Paige Hendrickson both hit some big shots when we needed them.

"And when (5-foot-4) Kaylese Johnson drove right down the middle against their big kids and scored, that was a big, big basket."

The diminutive senior speedster's coast-to-coast drive came with six minutes to go in the game, right after Lions sparkplug Mykaela Brandt inched her team back to a 41-35 deficit with a looping 3-pointer.

"Sometimes Kaylese is too quick for her own good and needs to turn down a shift," Roloff said. "But that drive changed the momentum."

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With a little cushion, the quietly efficient Strait hit a lay-up and then her fourth 3-pointer of the night.

A long two-point jumper by Johnson with 3:10 left gave Kennedy a seven-point lead.

After fighting back all night, Linn-Mar could get no closer.

The Cougars sank nine of 12 free throws down the stretch to preserve their lead.

"I was very proud of the way our kids battled all the way through," said Linn-Mar Coach Michael Brandt, whose post-Kiah Stokes squad will miss a state tournament for the first time since 2007. There are only two seniors on his roster. Rachel Thrune was out most of a month, and Shanice Cheatham tore her ACL in December.

"We've got a lot of young kids," said Brandt, "and they've had to adjust to new positions. But they battled all season, and they did it again tonight."

For a while on Wednesday, it was a game of spurts. Linn-Mar (10-12) started off 7-0, but the Class 4A 12th-ranked Cougars (13-9) responded with an 11-0 run of their own. The Lions scored six straight, then Kennedy went on an 11-2 surge.

Strait had 15 points by halftime with her team ahead 30-23.

"We had to do something to stop her," Brandt said afterward.

Using a box-and-one defense to bottle up the senior sharpshooter, Linn-Mar limited her to a single free throw in the third quarter.

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So Strait merely set up her teammates.

Sophomores Hendrickson and Holmes scored 11 and 10 points, respectively, to go along with Strait's game high 23.

"Courtney's an all-stater," Roloff said. "She always puts the team first. When they were stopping her, she opened things up for others."

Hendrickson said Strait is the team leader who keeps things under control.

"We knew Linn-Mar would come out with fire in their eyes," she said. "We got down,, but we stayed positive and didn't give up.

"We stayed calm and collected and just took it to 'em. It was a a good team win."

For his part, Brandt said his very young squad gave it their best. But it wasn't enough.

"Their kids stepped up and knocked down a couple more shots than we did when it counted."

LINN-MAR (50): Mykaela Brandt 3 2-7 9, Hannah Yearling 1 2-2 4, Sara Strauel 4 4-5 12, Jenna Harms 2 0-0 4, Courtney Major 4 3-4 13, Lannie Nietert 1 4-6 6, Rachel Thrune 0 0-0 0, Kristen Eiles 0 0-0 0, Kelsey Duggan 0 0-0 0, Carly Ryder 1 0-0 2. Totals 16 15-24 50.

KENNEDY (63): Kaylese Johnson 2 1-2 5, Paige Hendrickson 2 7-9 11, Madison Meier 1 0-0 3, Stephanie Botkin 1 1-2 3, Courtney Strait 6 7-8 23, Capria Davis 1 0-0 2, Mariah Simmons 1 0-0 2, Jordan Holmes 3 2-4 10, Taylor Wagner 2 0-0 4, Sarah Zinser 0 0-0 0. Totals 19 18-25

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63.

Halftime – Kennedy 30, Linn-Mar 23. 3-point goals – Linn-Mar 3 (Major 2, Brandt), Kennedy 7 (Strait 4, Holmes 2, Meier). Total fouls – Linn-Mar 21, Kennedy 19. Fouled out – none.